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SUBJECT: POPE, OLMERT DISCUSS LEBANON, POSSIBLE VISIT TO ISRAEL

REF: VATICAN 247 ET AL.

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (C) Referring to last summer's Lebanon conflict, Pope Benedict emphasized the need to protect civilians during his December 13 meeting with Israeli PM Olmert. The pope asked Olmert to ease obstacles for pilgrims traveling to Bethlehem during the Christmas season and said he was open to visiting Israel if there was progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Olmert pushed for further declarations from the Holy See in opposition to Iran's Holocaust conference, and promised that he had told his people to finalize the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See (reftel). Contacts told us that the most recent talks on the Fundamental Agreement had been less than productive, but that the pope did not plan to use the issue as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis his potential visit to Israel. End summary.

Christian Pilgrims

2. (C) Pope Benedict XVI and Israeli Prime Minister Olmert spend a longer-than expected half hour together December 13 in the first meeting between the two. The Vatican's press release on the visit rather tersely noted that the pope had discussed with Olmert "the position of the Catholic community in Israel, also in view of the forthcoming Christmas celebrations," a clear reference to challenges for Christian pilgrims traveling to Bethlehem. Franco Coppola, the Holy See MFA's Country Director for the Middle East, confirmed that that was a main thrust of the pope's time with Olmert. While Coppola didn't think the pope's appeal would change anything on the ground, he said the Holy See had to make a statement.

Stability and Lebanon

13. (C) Coppola told us that the pope had reacted favorably to Olmert's invitation to visit Israel, but told the PM that a visit would have to wait for greater stability on the ground. "It doesn't have to be totally tranquil," Coppola said, "but at least some progress from where we stand today." According to Coppola, the pope also alluded to last summer's conflict in Lebanon, emphasizing the need to spare civilians in such conflicts. While agreeing with Olmert on the danger Hezbollah poses to the region, the pope insisted that Syria needed to be involved in any dialogue that hoped to bring stability to the area.

Israeli View

14. (C) Israeli Ambassador Oded Ben-Hur, characteristically upbeat, told Ambassador Rooney he was pleased with the visit, saying it had gone much better than the Vatican's "tight-fisted" declaration had led people to believe. Ben-Hur said Olmert pushed for more from the pope and Vatican on Iran's Holocaust conference (the Vatican issued a statement December 12 condemning the conference, but Olmert asked that the Holy See continue to engage on the issue). On the Fundamental Agreement

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between Israel and the Holy See (reftel), Olmert told pope he had "instructed his people to bring to a conclusion" negotiations. He congratulated pope on his Turkey visit and emphasized need to encourage moderate Islam.

Fundamental Agreement Still Stalled

15. (C) Coppola was in fact in Israel at the time of the Olmert visit, attending the most recent round of negotiations between Israel and the Holy See on the Fundamental Agreement. While he was encouraged that the Israelis had restarted negotiations, Coppola said that little or no progress was made in this round. He said the Israeli team was new and not up on the issues; there would have to be another round of talks in January in Jerusalem before a plenary session with higher-ranking officials could be scheduled. Some within the Holy See have pushed for the Vatican to use a papal visit as a bargaining chip to pressure for Israel to complete the Fundamental Agreement negotiations; Coppola insisted that the pope would not do that, and had not linked the two issues during the visit.
ROONEY